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An Outing Into the Pyramid Peak Region of California

BY C. BARLOW

WITHOUT any pretention, for the present at least, of presenting a complete list of the birds of the Pyramid Peak region, the writer proposes to narrate some of the incidents of an interesting outing enjoyed by three Cooper Club members the past June. The reader of the "bird" magazines of today is of necessity impressed with the absence of narratives such as graced the pages of the old "bird" papers a decade or less ago. The tendency now is to specialize and narratives are few and far between. This change may have been for the better, but the writer believes that the perpetuation of the old style will at least partially restore the oozing enthusiasm of scores who—ornithologically speaking—have unconsciously found themselves "shelved" because of a lack of enthusiasm in the ornithological magazines of today. There seems to be no good reason why an article should lose its scientific value through being presented in a popular vein, and having made amends for any omissions or commissions, the writer proceeds to his subject with a lighter conscience.

June 4th found Mr. W. L. Atkinson and myself traversing the old Sierra stage road toward Fyffe, where our fellow club-member, Mr. L. E. Taylor, awaited our coming. Along the road comparatively little bird life is apparent, owing to the absence of underbrush, exposure to the hot sun and the volume of dust arising from the heavy travel. Yet along this road, at 3,500 feet elevation, among a considerable growth of cedars, the Audubon's Warblers (*D. auduboni*) have colonized to quite an extent, and although they occur all through the forest, they are noticeably common at this point. On June 5th I saw an Audubon's Warbler carrying food and shortly after found the nest twenty feet up on the drooping limb of

a large pine. Upon climbing the tree the young, four in number, flew from the nest to the ground, and the parent birds practiced the well-known ruse of dragging themselves along the ground. Wishing to secure a complete family of the species, the young and parents were taken, and upon skinning the young birds, each was found to be afflicted with a small grub which had lodged between the skull and the skin, and which crawled out after the skin had been turned. The nest was lined with feathers, as is usual in this species.

At Fyffe, Hutton's Vireo (*Vireo huttoni*) was commonly heard and one specimen, a female, was taken. I collected one in 1899, but never observed the bird so commonly as this year. It would be interesting to compare a nest of this vireo from the coniferous belt with one from the oak regions of the valley, to see if the bird's *penchant* for moss is here gratified, but unfortunately no nests were met with. On the evening of the 5th Mr. Atkinson and I went out to inspect the timber, but few birds were about and fewer nests were discovered, Mr. Atkinson noting a nest of the Black-throated Gray Warbler (*D. nigrescens*), from which the bird flew as he brushed past the small cedar tree containing it. The full complement of four eggs was taken the following day, the nest being constructed of the usual grayish materials. In this region the Black-headed Grosbeak (*Zamelodia melanocephala*) and the Thick-billed Sparrow (*Passerella i. megarhyncha*) are by far the most prominent vocalists.

The old habit of the male Cassin's Vireo (*V. s. cassinii*) singing from the vicinity of the nest did not fail and in response to the sharp, querulous song of the male from a black oak, I looked about and presently found the nest ten feet up on a drooping limb of the oak. The nest contained five eggs, well incu-



Photo by Barlow

PLATE I. NEST AND EGGS OF CALAVERAS WARBLER.

bated, and I am led to believe that this number of eggs is not unusual with *V. cassini*, having found two other nests, each holding five young. We shot a highly colored California Purple Finch (*Carpodacus p. californicus*), which was drinking at a brook, and thus ascertained that both this and the Cassin's Purple Finch (*C. cassini*) breed at Fyffe, 3,700 feet altitude. The Warbling Vireo (*V. gilvus*) was also common, being heard all through the woods.

left the nest for us to inspect and I have thought it interesting perhaps to present two photographs of this interesting set. Plate I illustrates the nest and eggs *in situ* and shows the surroundings to advantage. Believing in the collecting of nests *in situ*, Mr. Taylor consented to wield the shovel, which he did to good advantage, plate II showing the nest and a square foot of earth as removed, while the writer expectantly held the box and Mr. Atkinson gave valuable



PLATE II. COLLECTING THE CALAVERAS WARBLER'S NEST IN SITU
(Showing method by which such nests may be preserved)

Photo by Barlow

Before leaving Fyffe behind us I must mention a beautiful nest and eggs of the Calaveras Warbler (*Helminthophila rubricapilla gutturalis*) which Mr. Taylor found on May 25, situated on the bank of a small irrigating ditch flowing out of the forest a few yards from the stage road. Mr. Taylor discovered the nest while cleaning out the ditch; the bird flushing from beneath a small weed. The nest contained five eggs, slightly incubated, and Mr. Taylor thoughtfully

advice. This picture serves to illustrate how, with little trouble, really charming nests may be preserved, with their surroundings, for the cabinet.

June 7 was spent in climbing the grade with a team and camp equipage in quest of a cooler clime as well as new birds. Mr. M. Dunkum was added to the party and our first night found us camped on the south fork of the American river, where rainbow trout may usually be relied upon to supplement the

evening meal. The following day found us again toiling up the grade, finally deserting the dusty stage road for a rocky, almost abandoned, side road which should lead us away into the wilderness and to Pyramid Peak—our objective point. At 6,000 feet elevation several Sooty Grouse were heard “hoot-ing,” and one flushed from beside the road. At the top of the grade the rocky hillsides vanished as if by magic and a beautiful mountain meadow lay before us. Here a luxuriant growth of green grass, blossoming daisies and buttercups reminded one of early spring in the valley, and a distinctly cooler atmosphere was apparent. We headed eastward along the ridge toward Pyramid Peak, which, snow-capped and majestic, rose in the rich light of the setting sun, through an opening in the forest. Somewhere near the base of the peak we knew were several unoccupied dairy buildings, and accordingly we zigzagged our way through the spongy meadow and forest, following some barely visible tracks of the dairymen of the year before.

While jolting roughly over the uneven road a dull white patch in the woods came to view and a moment later the wagon wheels crunched in a coldly suggestive way over a bed of frozen snow! This sudden change from the valley was interesting, but in the shade of the tamaracks it was distinctly chilly as the shadows began to gather, and the members of the party silently buttoned their coats and hands were thrust well into pockets. We were tired and the cold forest wore a gloomy aspect. Still it was here that our first Audubon's Hermit Thrush (*Hylocichla aonalaschkae auduboni*) was heard—its beautifully rich song floating up to us from a ravine near by—seemingly the farewell strains of the birds' evening chorus.

Presently a group of small log buildings came into view, situated at the higher end of the meadow, and the fording of a few small streams brought us to camp, where supper and sleep

quickly closed the day's journal.

June 9th the birds had been up long before us, and we went out expectantly to study a fauna largely new to our experience. We found ourselves located at the head of a beautiful glacial meadow a mile or more in length, grown up to grass and traversed everywhere by little streams of snow-water, making it difficult to move about the meadow in places without getting into the water. As may be imagined, the ground was a spongy bog—a reservoir of moisture which probably feeds the lower streams through the summer. Fringing the meadow was a forest of tamarack and red fir, both trees being an abomination to the collector who attempts to climb them, owing to the droop of the limbs, caused by the heavy winter snows. Rocks and boulders are strewn everywhere among the trees.

I took an ante-breakfast stroll and learned my first lesson from a chipmunk. Birds were quite plentiful, though wild, and I was interested when the sharp “chit” of a junco sounded close by. Its persistence and volume caused me to look for the nest, but look as I might, I could not see the bird. Finally I espied a chipmunk sitting placidly on the low limbs of a red fir, and thereafter I treated all “chipping” notes with suspicion. A nest of the Blue-fronted Jay (*Cyanocitta s. frontalis*) containing four eggs, one-half incubated, was found ten feet up in a small tamarack, and the parent indulged in protests at long range. The nest contained a large proportion of mud—quite as much as a robin's—and was lined with fibers and pine needles.

Within fifteen feet of our camp fire stood a cabin, and in its side, about two feet above the ground, was a rough hole where a piece of board had broken off, and to this hole I saw a Mountain Chickadee (*Parus gambeli*) fly and chatter and then depart. After breakfast I investigated the hole and the little brooding bird looked up at me with perceptible fright. Finally she flew out revealing eight eggs and a rather

remarkable nest. The nest was built on a joist and was made to fill the cavity, which was about ten inches long and eight inches wide, and was virtually a deep mat of hair, fur, etc., of these dimensions, with a deep depression toward one end of the mat for the eggs. The nest was largely made of cow hair picked up in the corrals, and the eggs were but slightly incubated. We visited the nest several times and each time the female would raise her head, and holding her neck apparently at a tension, would deliberately move her head from side to side, describing quite an arc. The male bird spent his time in a tamarack close by "chickadee-ing" industriously. The Mountain Chickadee was in evidence about the stubs of the tamaracks and doubtless nests commonly.

Pine Siskins (*Spinus pinus*) were flying about the corrals in a restless way, twittering very much as the goldfinches do. The clear, liquid, yet dolorous song of the White-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*) sprang up from all over the meadow. In breeding season the birds must colonize to quite an extent in this meadow, for a species of dwarfed willow grows along all of the small streams, and was leafing out on June 10. The sparrows were evidently waiting for nest building, which was impracticable until the bushes should become in leaf. The breeding plumage and song of this *Zonotrichia* are both beautiful, and I could distinguish little difference in the breeding note and that heard in the valley in winter, unless the summer song of the bird is more intense. In the forenoon Mr. Atkinson and I went out for a stroll, interested as only ornithologists can be when an absolutely new field is spread before them. Mr. Atkinson shortly located a Blue-fronted Jay's nest in a red fir tree and inspection showed it to contain young.

While we were passing through a decided bog, we met our first California Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator californica*) quietly feeding beside an old log.

The bird was a male in brilliant plumage and doubtless had a nest in the neighborhood. We saw others of this species, which seems to be a fairly sociable bird, two males coming to a tamarack within a few feet of our camp, and one found his way into our collection. A persistent tapping called our attention to a red fir tree where a female Williamson's Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*) was drilling her nesting hole. We were allowed to approach to the foot of the tree where we watched the bird at work for some time. All through the woods the note of the Olive-sided Flycatcher (*Contopus borealis*) resounded, although the birds were apparently not yet nesting at this altitude, 7,500 feet.

In the afternoon we all climbed a granite ridge to 8,500 feet altitude, where snow was plentiful, and about the edge of which Pine Siskins and Cassin's Purple Finches were feeding in flocks. Several finches were secured. At this elevation, on the southeastern exposure of the ridge, a colony of Clarke's Nutcrackers (*Nucifraga columbiana*) was located in a gulch lined with hemlocks, and several of the birds were seen flying laboriously in the cold, stiff wind which prevailed. A pair of Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia arctica*) were also seen on the ridge.

The following day, June 10, we had set apart to make the ascent of Pyramid Peak, the summit of which appeared to be about two miles in an air line from our camp. So the party started with three cameras, a gun and other necessary paraphernalia, while Mr. Taylor carried a press for plants and secured many interesting botanical specimens. I may explain here that Pyramid Peak is the highest point in the range about Lake Tahoe, within the California line, and is credited with an altitude of 10,020 feet. The summit of the mountain is roughly the shape of a pyramid, its northern exposure being covered with snow throughout the year. We found our easiest means of ascent by making

a detour of the meadow and striking a "hog-back" which ran in nearly a straight line to the summit, although we had to clamber at intervals over snow and boulders. Just as we were leaving camp I collected a specimen of Audubon's Warbler, which lodged in the thick foliage of a red fir, and in trying to dislodge it I saw the nest, fifteen feet

which was made necessary by the light air. At 9,000 feet we made a photograph of the climb that lay before us and the result is presented in plate III. At this elevation the conifers were becoming noticeably dwarfed and there was an entire absence of underbrush, as shown in the plate. while bird life was rapidly diminishing. Mr. Atkinson noted a nest



Photo by Barlow

PLATE III. CLIMBING PYRAMID PEAK.

View at 9000 feet altitude, with peak in distance. The effect of the altitude on the timber is here shown.

up, on a drooping limb of the tree. But a few moments were lost in reaching it and I beheld a handsome set of four eggs of this warbler, heavily blotched about the large ends. The nest was lined with feathers—a characteristic of this bird's nest building.

We continued on our climb, traveling slowly up the steep mountain side,

of the Red-shafted Flicker (*Colaptes cafer*) at 9,200 feet, in a pine stub, containing six eggs, and a nest of the Mountain Bluebird, also in a stub, containing a single egg. At 9,000 feet the red firs disappear and are replaced by hemlocks and by the stunted pine mentioned, the latter extending up to within perhaps a mile of the summit, growing

smaller and smaller as the elevation increases. The last eighth of a mile is a conglomeration of great granite boulders and slabs of rock, with no perceptible vegetation, and this portion of the climb was made in short stages and with considerable exertion. The only feathered inhabitants of the summit as observed by us, were two pairs of the Gray-crowned Leucosticte or Rosy Finch (*Leucosticte tephrocotis*) which flew uneasily about the rocks, alighting for a moment on the pinnacle of some boulder and then taking wing again with a sharp, twittering note. One pair of birds was collected, both being well nourished, although the stomach of one was empty. The other stomach I submitted to the Department of Agriculture where it was kindly examined by Dr. S. D. Judd and Prof. F. E. L. Beal, who reported the analysis as follows: "The contents consisted of 30 per cent. animal and 70 per cent. vegetable matter. The animal matter included 12 leaf-hoppers (*Jassidae*), 20 per cent., and one spider, 10 per cent. The vegetable matter consisted of 23 seeds of a conifer, possibly the dwarf pine which you state is found near the summit of Pyramid Peak."

It is here appropriate to mention the magnificent view which is to be obtained from the summit of these mountain peaks. At one sweep of the eye hundreds of square miles of mountain ridges come to view, and the snow-capped ridge of which Pyramid Peak is a part, could be followed southward until it melted with the horizon in the distance. From our position fourteen mountain lakes could be counted, and the magnitude of the scene is beyond description. After an hour on the summit our party descended and prepared to strike camp on the morrow. On our homeward journey a number of Western Evening Grosbeaks (*Coccothraustes v. montanus*) were seen drinking from the streams in the road at 5,000 feet elevation and they undoubtedly nest on the near-by ridges. Following is appended a list of

the birds met with at our camp, 7,500 feet elevation, and above, and since but two days were spent in the locality the list is necessarily very incomplete. In *North American Fauna No. 16*, embracing the results of a biological survey of the Mt. Shasta region, Dr. Merriam has divided the life zones as follows: 5,500 to 7,000 feet, Canadian zone; 7,500 to 9,500 feet, Hudsonian zone; above 9,500 feet, Alpine zone, and reference to these may prove of some interest in considering the list here given.

PLUMED QUAIL (*Oreortyx p. plumiferus*). Commonly heard in the meadow at 7,500 feet, but very shy.

(SOOTY GROUSE) *Dendragapus obscurus fuliginosus*). Heard quite commonly at 6,000 feet, in the spruce belt, but apparently absent at higher altitudes, owing perhaps to lack of large timber.

WILLIAMSON'S SAPSUCKER (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*). One, a female, observed drilling a nest-hole in a red fir tree, near camp.

RED-SHAFTED FLICKER (*Colaptes cafer*). A nest and six eggs found by Mr. Atkinson at 9,200 feet, in sparse timber growth on June 10.

OLIVE-SIDED FLYCATCHER (*Contopus borealis*). Commonly heard at camp on June 9, but apparently not yet breeding.

WESTERN WOOD PEWEE (*Contopus richardsonii*). Heard frequently in the meadow, where the birds were engaged in nest building.

BLUE-FRONTED JAY (*Cyanocitta s. frontalis*). Breeding in the red firs and tamaracks, both eggs and young being found on June 9.

CLARKE'S NUTCRACKER (*Nucifraga columbiana*). A colony were found on the south-eastern slope of Pyramid Peak, in a gulch lined with hemlock, where it is quite possible they breed early in the season.

CALIFORNIA PINE GROSBEAK (*Pinicola enucleator californica*). Several male birds in rich reddish plumage seen about camp and one secured. The only note so far as observed consisted of a

harsh call note very similar to that of the Louisiana Tanager.

CASSIN'S PURPLE FINCH (*Carpodacus cassini*). Common about camp and as high as 9,000 feet, where it was feeding along the edge of the snow. At this date the birds were gregarious at this altitude. Near camp several came to a tree near our cabin and were collected, among them being one male bird in the gray plumage.

GRAY-CROWNED LEUCOSTICTE (*Leucosticte tephrocotis*). A pair secured at the summit of Pyramid Peak, on June 10.

PINE SISKIN (*Spinus pinus*). A flock was observed flying about the corral near camp, and others at 9,000 feet along the snow, all giving the twittering goldfinch notes. Gregarious at this date.

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (*Zonotrichia leucophrys*). A common songster in the meadow and up as high as 8,000 feet. I found a nest built two feet from the ground in a thick bush, on June 11, containing one egg, the bird flushing as I brushed past the bush.

WESTERN CHIPPING SPARROW (*Spizella s. arizonæ*). Heard several times at 7,500 feet.

THURBER'S JUNCO (*Junco h. thurberi*). Seen and heard commonly at 7,500 feet, where it was not yet breeding on June 10. Two specimens were collected.

LOUISIANA TANAGER (*Piranga ludoviciana*). Observed sparingly at 7,500 feet. Much commoner at lower altitudes.

——— SWALLOW (*Tachycineta*———). Either the Violet-green or Tree Swallow was observed about camp by Mr. Atkinson.

WARBLING VIREO (*Vireo gilvus*). Heard commonly about our camp. It seems strange that this valley bird should outrank the other vireos in this region, no other vireo song being heard.

AUDUBON'S WARBLER (*Dendroica auduboni*). Breeding at 7,500 feet. A nest and four eggs taken June 10.

HERMIT WARBLER (*Dendroica occidentalis*). One specimen seen on June 9, among the tamaracks.

PYGMY NUTHATCH (*Sitta pygmæa*). A nuthatch, doubtless of this species, was several times heard near camp.

MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE (*Parus gambeli*). Common about the rotten stubs and a set of eight slightly incubated eggs taken June 10. Mr. Atkinson found a nest just completed in a stub, but containing no eggs.

AUDUBON'S HERMIT THRUSH (*Hyloichichla aonalaschkæ auduboni*). The song was several times heard toward evening, from the tamarack forest, on June 8.

WESTERN ROBIN (*Merula m. propinqua*). A common resident in the meadow, nests with eggs being found June 9 and 10.

MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD (*Sialia arctica*). A nest was found in a stub by Mr. Atkinson at 9,000 feet, containing one egg. The nest was composed of grasses.



The American Titlark in Spring Plumage in Los Angeles Co., Cal.

ABOUT the middle of April, 1899, while crossing a swampy bit of pasture, I flushed several Titlarks (*Anthus pensilvanicus*) and as I wanted some specimens, I shot two. On picking them up I was very much surprised and puzzled at the plumage one of them was in; all that I had shot before had been during the winter months, and they were very unlike the bird I now held in my hand, so much so that I could hardly believe that they were of the same species. This bird had the back of a decided ashy tinge, and the under parts, which were of a vinaceous color, were altogether unspotted, except for a few faint, almost invisible specks on the throat. The other bird was not so ashy on the back, and the lower parts were rather heavily spotted, though not so much so as the winter specimens. On dissection the unspotted bird proved to be a male, the other a female.

I looked through all the descriptions